The Mine War of West Virginia

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It was a series of closely related events and more specifically by the toss of a coin that I found myself along the head waters of Little Coal River in a mining camp known as Blair. Blair is typical of hundreds of mining camps throughout the State of West Virginia, comprised of a company store, church, school house, and the miners shanties stood up on the mountain sides. At intervals there are coal tipples above the railroad, showing the location of the different mines from which the native and tramp miners gain a livelihood.

To have a clear and accurate conception of the situation one must consult a map of West Virginia, for there, as elsewhere, the topographical conditions were one of the big determining factors which helped to bring about such a state of affairs as existed, and still exist in southwestern part of West Virginia. Upon looking at the map of West Virginia, one observes that in the western part of the State the drainage system consists of a series of rivers flowing north to the Ohio River, between ridges of mountains, thus making these valleys the natural means of access to the interior, and dividing the country into distinct strips, which are more or less isolated from the rest of the country. Two of these strips, namely the Guyandotte and the Coal River Valleys, were of stragetic importance in the recent labor troubles. The ridge of mountains dividing these valleys was the natural boundary between the organized and the unorganized coal fields. All of the territory west of the ridge is unorganized, and is known as the Logan Field; the chief coal producing counties being Logan, McDowell, and Mingo of West Virginia, and Pike County, Kentucky. To the east and north of the ridge are the organized fields, including the great Kanawha field.

The Logan field has long been a source of trial, vexation, and tribulation to the officials of the Union, for it has successfully resisted all attempts of the union to organize it. To organize this field has been one of the premier objectives of the union, and in endeavoring to accomplish this purpose, all the power, influence, propoganda and money which this organization possesses, have been used. One unfamiliar with the true conditions of affairs wonders why so much energy should be exhausted by such a powerful organization, and for such a purpose. When, however, a few facts are known, on wonderment is expressed. The Logan field, if ever it is organized, will furnish the last requisite necessary to bring about a complete control of the output of the bituminous coal production in the United States; for the field when running at full capacity, can produce over a million and a half tons of coal a month. A general shutdown of production can never occur if the Union should declare a general strike, as long as the field is not within the Union folds. Indeed the field has come to the rescue twice in the last twenty-five years, supplying coal to our government, when coal was an absolute necessity to keep our navy supplied and to keep food and men moving. The first time occured in 1898, when a general strike over the central competitive field, composed of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Pennsylvania and Michigan, was called; the second, in 1919, when another general strike was called by the public-spirited officials of the Union. These two strikes were called just when our government had need of every resource and man available and it was only through the fact that the Logan field kept on producing, that enough coal was mined to furnish heat and power for our most pressing needs.

These two incidents proved conclusively that the United Mine Workers of America could never control the entire output of bituminous coal as long as Logan was unorganized, therefore never able to bring such terrific pressure on the public by a general strike that their demands would have to be met. This accounts for the fact that so much effort has been expended by the Union to organize this field.

But why should this place be the last stronghold of the non-union miners and operators? In answering that question one must take into consideration that this part of West Virginia, in fact the whole of West Virginia, is a comparatively young field, whose possibilities of production are just beginning to be realized by far-seeing mining experts. Then again, the majority of the miners in this field have no desire to join the Union, for while drawing a smaller daily wage than their Union brethren, they are sure of steady work and so make a larger yearly wage. This is due to the fact that in competition, the operators of this region are able to underbid the operators of the central competitive field, for in Logan the wage scale follows the economic law of supply and demand, while in the central competitive field the wage scale is fixed by a contract made between the operators and miners.

In 1920 the Union gained a foothold in the Tug River district, in Mingo County, where some of the miners demanded the wage scale which was awarded to the miners in the central competitive field, by the wage scale commission. This scale was granted them, but they decided that they should organize, and so formed a Union. The operators along Tug River absolutely refused to recognize the Union, and tried to run the mines with non-union men and since that time there has been a continuous round of bloodshed and distruction in Mingo County.

The Union miners all over the country have been watching developments along the Tug River with keen interest. Mutterings were heard on all sides from the Union miners of West Virginia about the way the striking miners were being treated in Mingo County; and some talk of armed intervention was uttered, but the state government thought that it was just talk.

However, about the middle of August, 1921, incidents came to pass which showed clearly that an alarming state of affairs had been reached, and still worse conditions were to be expected in the future. First and foremost was the shooting of Syd Hatfield, of Williamson, who was the champion of the striking miners and one time sheriff of McDowell County. When the news that their idol had been shot reached them, armed miners began to pour into Marmet, a mining camp, about 10 miles south of Charleston, with the avowed intentions of marching up the Little Coal River, over the mountains at Blair, into Logan,

and thence to Mingo County to put to rout the mine guards and detectives who were in the employ of the operators. Still not much apprehension was felt over the state except by one man, Don Chafin, the sheriff of Logan County, who long has been the sworn enemy of every Union. He immediately started to deputize men, and to fortify the mountain tops between Blair and Logan with trenches, and machine guns along a front of about twenty-five miles.

When these armed men started to collect at Marmet, Mr. Keeney and Mr. Mooney, President and Secretary, respectively, of District 17 of U. M. W. A., declared that they had nothing whatsoever to do with the movement and washed their hands of the whole affair. This statement quieted the fears of the unsuspecting populace, for they well knew that the miners, without any leaders, could not make any concerted movement. This illusion was dispelled suddenly and with a thoroughness that left most of the people helpless and gasping. It was done in this fashion. Mother Jones, a labor leader and agitator of national repute, appeared on the scene. She must have had forebodings of the terrible struggle that would take place if these men at Marmet were allowed to proceed on their intended march. With foresight that was uncanny, she knew that the coming struggle could only bring discredit, and loss of prestige to the miners. To forstall, and eventually stop the march, she visited the miners' camp, and advised them to return to their homes; for she stated in her address that she had an official telegram from President Harding in which he announced that if the miners persisted in their intentions of marching to Mingo, that he would send federal troops, and that they, the miners, would be treated as insurgents. She had them almost converted to her idea of returning to their homes, when Mr. Kenney arrived, called her a liar, and a traitor to the cause of labor. He also stated that he would see that the miners would get all the help possible from the Union. This is only one of the facts that went to prove that the miners were receiving directions from their officials, and that the march to Mingo was only a ruse to cover up the purpose of breaking the last strong-hold of the non-union operators at Logan.

From then on there was no turning back, and when the miners reached Madison, the county seat of Boone County, their ranks were increased daily by squads of miners off the various rivers and creeks in the mining district. On August 21, General Bandholtz, appointed by the President to make an investigation of mining conditions in West Virginia, made a visit to the armed camp at Madison. He was accompanied by Mr. Kenney, and he warned them a second time that they had better desist from their avowed purpose of marching to Mingo, thereby taking the government into their own hands. They seemed to take his words to heart, and started to disband till most of them were on their way back home.

When it became known that the miners' army was actually disbanding people all over the state breathed more easily, especially the inhabitants of Logan County. They were almost lulled into a feeling of security. In the meanwhile at Blair and Beech a new angle was developing. Somehow or other, a rumor started and gained such importance which no amount of resoning could shake. It seemed that every miner in Blair was under the impression that the sheriff of Logan County was going to attack Blair and destroy it because it was a Union mining camp. This feeling was strengthened by agitators from outside, who would have the local officials call a meeting and then tell the miners that he had convincing proof that the deputy sheriffs were intending to raid Blair. The miners were thrown into a frenzy of fear, arming themselves, and sending for help. On Thursday afternoon, August 25, the operators at Blair, Beech, Sharples and other points, were forced to shut down their mines at the point of a rifle, call out their men so that their employees could be available to resist the invasion of the deputies.

This marked the real beginning of the reign of terror. Women fled to St. Albins and Huntington with their children, some dry-eyed, some weeping, and some with curses on their lips for every established thing except the Union. Miners armed themselves, some grimly and quietly, some joyously as if they were on a picnic, while others grew timid and fled. Patrols were formed which marched up and down the tracks, stopping and searching everybody at the point of rifles and forcing men, and even boys to take up arms. Another body was formed which went up in the mountains to resist the invasion, which every miner expected, but which never occurred. Men not connected with the mining business fled, while operators and mine employees not connected with the Union stayed to watch the fun, and if necessary, to protect the different mining companies' property. In the whole length of the valley it is doubtful if there were fifty men who were not in sympathy with the miners.

Events moved swiftly from now on toward the culmination, the sending of federal troops to restore peace and order. The fact that it became necessary for the state government to appeal to the federal government for help shows the true aspect of affairs.

To continue, however, on the night of August 27, a most untimely and ill-advised act was done. State police who happened to be in Logan were sent by the state authorities over to Beech, to make some arrests for the civil authorities. A small detachment on guard at Beech mistook them for deputies and fired upon them. The state police returned the fire and killed three miners. From then on there could be no peaceful settlement, but war to the finish between the deputies of Logan, and the Union miners who swore that they would organize Logan by force, kill Dan Chafin, destroy the non-union operators and their property, and liberate the down-trodden miners in the Logan field.

Every train brought in armed miners from the various rivers till by the 31st of August above five thousand men were at Blair, which was only one of the sectors of the battle front. There was not a trace of civil authority left, and the only assurance of safety that anybody had, who was not in sympathy with the miners, was the caliber of the pistols one carried. Wires were cut, all train service stopped, except mail trains, and finally this last connection with the rest of the country stopped, by order of the miners. In fact, the entire valley was in control of the miners who then confiscated everything that could be of any value to them—overalls, food, automobiles and whole trains. Truly it was a reign of terror, and left those, who were out of sympathy with the miners, raging at their own helplessness.

On Wednesday, the thirty-first of August, the miners attacked the positions of the deputies, and the first engagement resulted in favor of the overall army, so called because its members wore, as a uniform, a suit of blue overalls. They succeeded in trapping three deputies, and killing them in cold

blood. The overall army next faced the machine guns, and fell back from the deadly rain of steel that was direct against them.

On the same morning, Major Thompson, the President's special representative, arrived in Blair on a special train. He had with him a proclamation from the President ordering the miners to lay down their arms by Thursday noon, September 1, or they would be declared insurgents, and treated as such. Guns were leveled on him, and he was forced to board his train.

The battle raged incessantly for four days and three nights. It was no mere skirmish, but a real battle fought with modern implements of warfare, high power rifles, machine guns, areoplane and bombs. The only thing that was lacking in modern warfare was artillery and gas. The plight of the inhabitants of Logan County was desperate, for thousands of men with high power rifles practically surrounded them. If their fortifications could not hold out, God alone knows what would have happened.

However, the machine gun fire was too much for the miners and after the first taste of destruction, of which the machine guns were capable, no direct attack was made on the positions, but bushwhacking was resorted to.

The headquarters of the miners at Blair was the school house, where new arrivals were outfitted and armed, food served, and the various leaders kept up the courage of the army by long talks on all sorts of wild reports. One such report was to the effect that there could not be any federal intervention for the combined navies of England and Japan had set sail for America to stop the federal government from intervening. This was due to the fact that the Unions were so strong in these countries that they had forced the resources of these governments to the rescue of the Union in this country. Another, was that labor all over the United States had taken up arms against capitol, and that the great struggle between labor and capitol was beginning. Things did look black at Blair, for no news was attainable from the outside, and it was a well known fact that the miners from Ohio, Indiana and Illinois were present in large numbers at Blair.

On Saturday afternoon, of September 3rd, it became evident that there was a war in progress in West Virginia for the first detachment of troops arrived at Sharples, a few miles below Blair. On Sunday morning, the 26th and 28th Infantry arrived in Blair, prepared to give battle, but the miners by this time were thoroughly disheartened, the machine gun fire taking most of their courage, and the announcement of federal troops in the valley taking the last bit of it. Saturday night the miners left Blair in droves, taking to hills and forest to escape detection and to save their rifles.

Upon their arrival, the troops immediately searched the miners, and took all their arms, sent searching parties to the front to collect the dead and wounded, and in general to bring everything back to a peaceful condition. No arrests were made as it was generally conceded that the men in the ranks of the overall army were misguided into defying the government. An investigation was immediately started to apprehend the leaders of the army, and to secure evidence to convict them.

Since the arrival of the troops there has been no serious out-breaks, but the Union has not given up hopes of entering the last remnant of the non-union coal fields. At first, when they discovered that they were not going to be punished for their deeds, the miners had visions of following the troops into Logan, and organizing it under the protection of the army. This hope was blasted, for the men whose homes were not at Blair, were deported as soon as possible, and the remainder told to stay on their side of the mountain.

Developments are bound to grow out of the struggle and whether the Union or the operators at Logan will win the fight, time alone will tell.

One of the big problems of the mining engineer, is to prevent such occurrences in our future. From the peculiar position that he occupies in the mining industry, he is better situated to bring about a fair understanding between the operator and miner for in his work he comes into close personal contact with his employer and with the men, thus getting that human element of understanding which will be necessary before any state of equilibrium will be reached. His will not be an easy problem for on one side he will have to combat ignorance and suspicion and on the other side the desire to gain as much as possible with the least expense. The miners are generally ignorant, some illiterate and many of them foreigners, who lead a hazardous life. Like most any other hazardous occupations, mining produces that "don't care" spirit, which is dangerous when once it finds expression. Then the miners possess tenacity of purpose, which one cannot help admiring and they will suffer privations of the worst sort to accomplish their purpose, when once they believe that they are right.

They are independent, proud, and quick to resent any wrong, or fancied wrong, and will strike on the least provocation. To handle these men requires skill and tact, and a thorough understanding of human nature. On the other side, the operators are not running the mines for the benefit of humanity, but are working for personal gain. In the past, some of the conditions of the miners were horrible and beyond description, which the Union has corrected. It has also accomplished a great deal that is of actual benefit to both employee and employer. To bring about a harmonious relation between the Union and operator will take time and absolute confidence in the human race and a wisdom that passes all understanding.

SLIGHT FAVOR REQUESTED

An Eastern college graduate applied for work in a Michigan lumber camp and was assigned to one end of a cross saw, the other end being in charge of an old and experienced lumberman. At the end of an hour the veteran stopped sawing and regarded his weary partner with pitying eyes.

"Sonny," he said, "I don't mind your riding on this saw, but if it's just the same to you, I wish you'd quit scraping your feet on the ground."—*American Legion Weekly.*

AUTO-ATTRACTION

DAUGHTER—"He's frightfully attractive, I think."

MOTHER—"I can't see it."

DAUGHTER—"Good Heavens, do you mean to say you can't see that big yellow car?"—*The Passing Show (London).*